

Faith leaders challenge legislators to address disparities

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On Thursday, April 4, 175 African-American clergy and members of the faith community held a rally at the Minnesota State Capitol Rotunda. On the 45th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, they assembled to urge legislators to close racial equity gaps and put the children and families in their communities on a firm foundation.

The African American community has been traditionally left out of the public decision-making process and faith leaders proclaimed the need to develop a new relationship – one in which the community is regularly consulted.

Addressing the crowd, Rev. Brian Herron, Pastor at Zion Baptist Church, Minneapolis said, "We are not just here to honor the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on his day of his murder, but to put feet to our faith and press forward on the work for justice he began. We are here not just to call for action, but to act... We are not here as beggars today; we are not here as pigs wanting to feed at the public trough. We are not even here asking you to solve the problems. We are here demanding a relationship with our elected leaders to work together; to sit down at the table and begin to create long-term long-lasting impactful legislation and policies."

The African American faith community has a long and storied history of being in the vanguard of social justice movements in this country and is compelled by the historical and biblical prophetic traditions of their faith to hear and respond to the cries of the people.

Rev. Billy G. Russell, Pastor at Greater Friendship Missionary Baptist Church in Minneapolis said, "Yes, we want to see people saved, but we want to see people fed. We want to see people saved, but we want to see people educated. We want to see people saved, but we want people to have good jobs. We want to see people saved, but we want to see people have the opportunity to go to college. Everyone has the right to be a functional, productive citizen."

Leaders spoke at length about the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), proposed legislation that would greatly reduce racial and ethnic disparities in juvenile detention and provide funding for detention alternatives.

"As the education opportunity gap widens, it sucks our children into the cradle to prison pipeline," Said Rev. Charles Gill, Pastor at Pilgrim Baptist Church in St. Paul, "Sen. Jeff Hayden and Rep. Ray Dehn's bill is probably one of the first steps in creating an environment that doesn't just punish but demonstrates redemption and inspires hope for those who find themselves languishing in the dismal crypts of juvenile correctional facilities. This bill must not just be heard, it must be passed."

After the rally, many in the group went door to door to visit their legislators, share their personal stories and urge passage of the JDAI. They challenged their elected officials to use bold leadership and courageous actions to eliminate racial inequities.